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ABSTRACT

The study explored the importance of parent-child rapport as it pertained to the child's career development in the context of rural Ontonagon County, Michigan. Questionnaires were self-administered to 201 high school seniors (100 boys and 101 girls) in the spring of 1974. Information was gathered on a wide range of topics dealing with the youngsters' perceptions of their own social situations in the county and about their future plans. Dependent variable, "plan to go to college", was treated as a dichotomy (those students who did or did not plan to attend a college or university). Key independent variables were social class origin, rapport with parents, and scholastic performance level. Sex was held constant throughout. The findings affirmed that parental rapport in the home setting was an important factor affecting the educational mobility of young boys and girls in this rural Michigan county. The full impact of parental rapport emerged when viewed in the normative context of a youngster's social class background. The general conclusion was that rapport with parents was an important factor affecting the educational achievement levels of rural youngsters; it was especially important for those from lower status backgrounds and for those whose record of scholastic performance was not very strong. (NQ)

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PARENT-CHILD RAPPORT: AN IMPORTANT FACTOR IN THE STRUCTURING OF EDUCATIONAL AMBITION IN RURAL AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

Modern American society is characterized by an increasingly complex web of highly specialized social and economic roles and, concomitantly, educational attainment has become a leading criterion by which young people are "sorted-out" to fill those roles. A crucial stage in the career development process, then, is at the point when students are required to make a key decision about whether or not to pursue the next higher level of education (i.e., college). In the American system, of course, that choice is to a considerable extent left up to the individual and, consequently, ambition (i.e., individual motivation) plays an important part in the status attainment process.

This study explores certain selected determinants of educational ambition. Much past research has shown that factors relating to the family, a primary agency of socialization, must be considered in explaining the status aspirations and attainments of youth. One line of inquiry has lead to a substantial accumulation of evidence confirming that youngsters from families of higher socioeconomic status tend to have higher levels of educational aspirations and attainments.[1/] Other researchers have explored various dimensions of the normative configuration and value patterns of family and home life which account for variations in the educational plans of high school students. Most notably these efforts have dealt with "education-specific" forms of family influences, such as "parental encouragement" or "stress" on their children's college plans.[2/]

The socialization process, of course, is not entirely one-sided. That parents emphasize one value over another, or one form of behavior over another, does not assure that children will either perceive or internalize what parents (either intentionally or unintentionally) advocate. Thus, the influence of parents on the educational plans of their children depends not only on the value climate in the home (normative influence), as researches cited above suggest, but also on the extent to which children recognize, appreciate, and identify with the norms and values of their parents (regulative influence).[3/]

It is primarily the latter half of this distinction (i.e., the regulative aspect of parental influence) to which this paper is addressed. Stated in more concrete terms, I am interested in the degree to which the social situation in the home favors an effective

pattern of interaction by which parents are able to transmit their own attitudes, as well as their perceptions and assessments of the norm and value patterns of the larger society, on to their children. The unique element of the parent-child interaction system I am specifying is perhaps contained in the notion of "rapport." Rapport with parents, as conceptualized here, is of a conditional nature; under the condition of a strong working rapport between parents and children a greater conformity to expectations and a greater sharing of value patterns is likely to occur within the family than under the weak rapport condition.

Two general observations can be made regarding past sociological research on the effects of family interaction patterns on the educational mobility of young people. First, there has been a tendency to conceptualize the parent-child relationship factor as a "cause"; i.e., as a "stimulus" to which the youngster responds through higher or lower levels of aspiration and/or achievement, rather than as a "condition" (in the sense of a strong working rapport) which sets the stage for the transmission of messages and influences of the normative type. Second, there appears to be a real lack of agreement among the empirical findings. One body of literature asserts that high educational aspirations are a consequence of positive parent-child interaction, while another set suggests that achievers emerge from a negative family milieu.[4/] In an effort to shed further light on the antithetical nature of these researches, the present study explores the importance of parent-child rapport as it pertains to the career development of youngsters in the context of rural Ontonagon County, Michigan.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Ontonagon County, situated on Lake Superior in the relatively remote, far northwestern corner of Michigan's upper peninsula, comprises the locale from which our study population was drawn. In area, it is the third largest county in Michigan, but it is also one of the most rural and sparsely populated. Over the last few decades, the main economic base in

Ontonagon County has shifted from agriculture to mining; today there are about 3500 persons employed in this industry. In addition, the pulp-paper industry has prospered. Farming and farm related occupations have suffered rapid decline during the period.

The data for this paper were obtained in the spring of 1974 and make up one phase of a larger ongoing research project being conducted in Ontonagon County.[5] The study population includes a near total representation of the county's 1974 graduating classes; 100 boys and 101 girls. Two earlier phases of the larger project encompass comparable cohorts of high school seniors in 1957/58 and 1968. Although patterns of change in the structuring of educational mobility in Ontonagon County are of considerable interest, a suitable discussion of these changes is beyond a manageable scope for this paper.[6]

Via self-administered questionnaires information was gathered on a wide range of topics dealing with the youngsters' perceptions of their own social situations in the county and about their plans for the future. The dependent variable, plan to go to college, is viewed as a major step in the process of attaining upward social mobility. It is treated as a dichotomy (those students who did or did not plan to attend a college or university). The key independent variables are as follows (see Table 1 for marginal distributions.):

Social class origin, indicative of the normative influences of parents and economic well-being of the family, is measured by the Duncan Index (Reiss, 1961).[7] SES scores are collapsed into dichotomous form: scores of 25 and below are treated as "lower SES" and scores above 25 as "higher SES." The "lower SES" category is composed largely of manual occupations and, for the most part, non-manual occupations are concentrated in the "higher SES" category.

Rapport with parents, as perceived by the youngster, is indexed by a nine iten summated Likert-type scale; each item allows for responses in five categories from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."[8] The parental rapport variable aims to reflect the regulative influence of parents on the educational aspiration levels of their children. High scale scores are indicative of a strong, healthy rapport with parents, whereas scores on the lower end of the scale suggest weak parental rapport.

Grades in school, indicative of advancement at an early stage in the educational mobility process, is derived from the student's graduation rank. Rank scores are dichotomized at the midpoint into high and low categories. This factor, scholastic performance level, is conceptualized as an intervening variable which mediates the flow of influence from social class and parental rapport on to college plans.

In view of the differences in the career patterns for the two sexes, and the idea that boys and girls undergo quite dissimilar socialization processes from a very young age, it is likely that knowledge of such differences will add significantly to our understanding of the structuring of rural youth ambition. Sex, therefore, is held constant throughout.

FINDINGS

The results of this exploratory study support the general idea that parents help shape their children's career development through normative expectations and value patterns associated with their socioeconomic status and style of life on the one hand, and via positive parent-child rapport on the other. (See Table 2 for a summary of the basic percentage differences and measures of statistical association.)

Clearly, among girls and especially so among boys, there is a strong positive effect of socioeconomic background on plans to go to college. Boys and girls from upper status origins are far more likely than their lower status counterparts to be oriented toward the pursuit of a college education. This finding, of course, is consistent with research cited earlier.

The parental rapport factor appears to be of relatively minor import as a determinant of educational plans. Girls experiencing strong rapport with their parents are somewhat more likely to manifest college orientations than are those evidencing weak parental rapport; yet this relationship does not hold in the case of boys.

In Ontonagon County, the achievement of a strong academic record at the high school level appears to be an important factor in the educational mobility process, as suggested by the relatively large proportion of college-bound youngsters in the top half of their graduating class. It is not unlikely that the normative backgrounds and the patterns of interaction in the family, important in shaping a youngster's career plans, might also be reflected in their scholastic performance. In point of fact, these data demonstrate that parallels do indeed exist. Socioeconomic background of the family emerges as a dominant factor affecting the academic achievement of boys (a positive association of moderate magnitude is manifested); among girls, on the other hand, school achievement varies in large measure with the level of parental rapport experienced in the home.

Influence of Parent-Child Rapport on Patterns of Educational Mobility Under Conditions of Higher and Lower Socioeconomic Status:

It is not until the influence of socioeconomic status and parental rapport are viewed simultaneously, that their full impact becomes apparent. Among girls as well as boys, when socioeconomic status is controlled, the importance of parental rapport is specified to those from lower SES families. That is, the college plans of youngsters from upper status families are basically unaffected by variabilities in parental rapport, while rapport with parents emerges as an important influence on the college plans of boys and girls from lower status families. (See Table 3.)

This finding suggests that: 1) class related norms and values influencing youngsters from upper status backgrounds provide sufficient impetus to maintain a high degree of college motivation regardless of how well they get along with parents, and 2) aspirant norms are not passed on very well in lower status families and, therefore, strong parent-child rapport becomes an instrumental mechanism for normative encouragement, albeit far more diffuse and less specified than forms of encouragement commonly associated with the social class configuration, (i.e.; with "parental stress" on college, "parental encouragement," or with "perceived parental interest.")

By holding the effect of socioeconomic status constant among boys, the original null relationship between grades in school and rapport with parents no longer obtains. Socioeconomic status in this case acts as a suppressor of the "compensating influences" of parental rapport on grades. Where the academic achievement of lower status boy is enhanced by the interpersonal support of his parents, the upper SES boy tends to perform better in school when he and his parents are not getting along (!).

Similarly, socioeconomic status conditions the influence of parental rapport on the scholastic performance of girls. Among lower SES girls, strong rapport with parents emerges as an important factor affecting the achievement of high grades in school. The scholastic performance of girls from upper status families, on the other hand, is influenced to a lesser extent by the level of parental rapport (Table 4).

In lower status families, the press to achieve appears weaker and, where parental rapport is strong, the normative support of parents is most evident. Parent-child rapport, to be sure, may also be enhanced by superior performance on the part of the youngster, implying a mutually reinforcing association between the two variables. Strong school achievement by children, on the one hand, and positive reactions by parents on the other, are compelling rewards for lower parents and their children.

Boys from upper status families, it would seem, are expected to demonstrate superior performance in school and, consequently, the attainment of good grades is not an uncommon occurance and may not be given the high level of positive reinforcement found among lower status families. Although upper SES boys in Ontonagon County do tend to achieve strong scholastic records, the degree of pressure exerted by parents, (to get high grades, to be "successful", and to "get ahead" in general), appears to have the unanticipated consequence of straining relationships between these boys and their parents. For this reason, one may surmise, upper status boys who do get along well with their parents are not necessarily strong achievers.

Scholastic Performance as an Intervening Variable

By controlling on scholastic performance a clearer observation of the influence of socioeconomic status is obtained. Particularly noteworthy is the discovery that social class and scholastic ranking manifest substantial independent effects on the college plans of Ontonagon County youth.

Table 5 shows that among upper status boys and girls, by comparison with those from lower status backgrounds, the attainment of high grades in school is not an entirely vital factor since the normative support in the family appears strong enough to encourage many of these youngsters to pursue college careers despite their mediocre academic showing. The level of ambition of lower SES students who are not favored with high levels of normative (class) pressure in the home, on the other hand, seems more dependent upon their achieved status in school. Without high grades, lower status boys and girls are structured away from the educational mobility process in the home as well as at school. In fact, lower SES youngsters are more than six times as likely to go on to college if they rank in the upper half of their class than if they rank in the lower half. Among upper SES students, however, the college plans of high and low scholastic achievers are separated by a considerably narrower margin.

The introduction of grades in school as an intervening variable has a significant effect on the rather weak zero-order association between parental rapport and college plans. Positive rapport with parents is considerably more important for girls who rank in the lower half of their graduating class than for those ranking in the upper half. This finding follows the general pattern of social class influence; the ambition level of girls lacking the necessary scholastic performance to help them build mobility orientations depends on the socioeconomic status of their families. Similarly, girls with low grades may find support through the rapport they experience with parents and, this in turn, heightens their educational ambitions. The negligible zero-order association for boys remains relatively unchanged when grade level is held constant (Table 6.)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The findings from this study affirm that parental rapport in the home setting is an important factor affecting the educational mobility of young boys and girls in this rural Michigan county. Although parental rapport manifests a relatively minor independent effect on grades in school and plans to pursue a college education, viewed in the normative context of a youngster's social class background, its real impact begins to emerge.

Boys and girls from lower status origins, who lack the kind of normative encouragement and economic resources typically found in upper status families, appear to benefit considerably from the external support offered them through satisfactory relationships with their parents. Youngsters from upper SES families, on the other hand, show relatively less dependence on parental rapport; their upper socioeconomic status origins and the benefits derived therefrom tend to pull them along. Indeed, the pressure experienced by many boys from upper status families, I would imagine, although resulting in rather strong college aspirations and school achievement, also may be crystallized within or in some respects derived from a situation of generally weak interpersonal relationships with parents.

The general conclusion to be drawn is that rapport with parents is an important factor affecting the educational achievement levels of rural youngsters; it is especially important for those from lower status backgrounds and, also, for those whose record of scholastic performance is not very strong.

One is left to ponder, of course, why a comparable pattern does not obtain among upper status boys and girls. Perhaps the most plausible explanation is that which I have suggested throughout my presentation. A healthy working relationship with parents facilitates the transmission of a diffuse form of normative support which may be likened to that commonly associated with the social class configuration. Lower status youngsters benefit from the full impact of this support, while those from upper status families gain only from that portion which is independent of the goal-directionality effect inherent in the "social class influence".

The theoretical significance of the parental rapport variable in the development of sociological knowledge relating to educational mobility depends in part upon its uniqueness as a sociological concept. The conceptualization of parental rapport established at the outset of this study asserts that the normative expectations parents have of the attitudes, behavior, and goals of their children are mediated by the quality of parent-child interaction, i.e., the level of parental rapport. On the other hand the main body of literature, some of which was discussed earlier, invariably views the relationship between parent and child as a "source" of influence, rather than as a "condition" that sets the stage for the transmission of other normative influences. The question arises, then, as to whether or not parental rapport is a theoretically useful concept to explain patterns and regularities in the flow of normative influence within the family, beyond or in lieu of the more traditional conceptualization.

Researchers positing that the relationships between parents and their children which inherently and in a direct causal sense lead to either higher or lower levels of educational aspiration and achievement, have in effect limited the scope of their interpretations, and, I believe, the real meaning of the concept. In short, interpretations have been largely confined to either the "deprivation-aspiration hypothesis" (that a depriving family situation encourages youngsters to "escape" via high aspirations and achievement), or the "reward-aspirations hypothesis" (that a rewarding family milieu causes youngsters to aspire). These interpretations, however, do not embrace the obvious possibility that relationships in the home may also pave the way (or create stiff barriers) to the many other kinds of support parents are able to provide for their children.

To answer the above question then, the approach and subsequent results of this inquiry suggest that parental rapport is an effective sociological concept to incorporate into this particular line of research in conjunction with the more traditional concepts and approaches. Yet, in an empirical sense, parent-child rapport itself may perhaps never be entirely devoid of some form of normative loading, and therefore may never be entirely differentiated from the more traditional conceptualization simply because of the multidimensionality of any measuring instrument that purports to tap this phenomenon.

NOTES

1. Some examples at various points in time and over a range of populations are: Kahl 1953; Rosen 1956; Bordua 1960; Simpson 1968; Williams 1972; Kerckhoff 1974; and Shapira and Yuchtman 1975.

2. Various measures of education-specific parental influence are: parental stress (Bordua 1960), parental encouragement (Kahl 1953; Mcdill and Coleman 1965; Rehberg and Westby 1967; Sewell et al. 1968, 1969; Jacobsen 1971), parental aspirations (Perlin 1967; Duncan 1968; Kandel and Lesser 1969, 1972), and parental expectations (Williams 1972).

3. This is a very general assumption of socialization theory (Rosen 1964); its importance in this line of research has been stressed by Rushing (1964).

4. Studies finding support for the hypothesis that negative parent-child relationships lead to educational mobility are: Ellis 1952; Warner and Abegglen 1955; Dynes, Clarke and Dinitz 1956; Rushing 1964; and Gnagey 1968.

   Research arguing in favor of the hypothesis that positive relationships in the home result in upward educational mobility are: Douvan and Adelson 1958; Morrow and Wilson 1961; Peppin 1963; Christopher 1957; Furstenberg 1971, Kandel and Lesser 1972; and Schwarzweller and Lyson 1974.

5. See Goldsmith and Beegle (1962) for a description of the "initial phase" of the project, and Rieger, Beegle, and Fulton (1973) for the first follow-up study.

6. See Clay (1976) for a detailed assessment of patterns of change in the structuring of educational mobility across the three phases of the Ortonagon County project.

7. A parallel analysis was conducted employing a measure of father's education level; the results of this analysis show little variation from the results of the analysis presented in this paper using socioeconomic status (measured by the Duncan scale) as an indicant of a youngster's social class background. Among boys as well as girls, SES and father's education level prove to be very highly correlated.

8. Categories were subsequently collapsed into trichotomous form with the "undecided" category as a midpoint and each item scored from 1 through 3; aggregated scale scores ranged from 9 through 27. The specific items are as follows: a) It is hard for me to feel pleasant at home. b) My parents try to understand my problems and worries. c)As far as my ideas are concerned my parents and I live in two different worlds. d) There is real love and affection for me at home. e) My parents criticize me too much. f) My friends have happier homes than I do. g) Too often my parents compare me unfavorably with other children. h) As I have known it, family life is happy. i) My parents expect too much of me.

   The possibility that these items reflect two or more dimensions was taken into consideration. A systematic analysis of the nine item inter-correlation matrix as well as a factor analysis (Singh 1975, p.37), and a standard item analysis, suggests that the set of items, for the most part are derived from a similar universe of context and represent a unidimensional attribute space.

Table 1.

Percentage Distributions of the Study Variables

College Plans

	No College	College	Total %
Boys (N=100)	68	32	100
Girls (N=101)	50	50	100

Socioeconomic Status

	Low SES	High SES	Total %
Boys (N=100)	49	51	100
Girls (N=101)	53	47	100

Parental Rapport

	Weak Rapport	Strong Rapport	Total %
Boys (N=100)	64	36	100
Girls (N=101)	54	46	100

Grades in School

	Low Grades	High Grades	Total%
Boys (N=100)	58	42	100
Girls (N=101)	42	58	100

TABLE 2. Bivariate Relationships

(a)

% Planning to Attend College by Socioeconomic Status

	Socioeconomic Status		
	Low SES	High SES	Q
Boys	18	45	.57
Girls	42	60	.35

(b)

% Planning to Attend College by Parental Rapport

	Parental Rapport		
	Weak Rapport	Strong Rapport	Q
Boys	33	31	-.05
Girls	45	57	.21

(c)

% Planning to Attend College by Grades in School

	Grades in School		
	Low Grades	High Grades	Q
Boys	17	52	.68
Girls	27	64	.64

(d)

% Ranking in the Upper Half of Their Class by Socioeconomic Status

	Socioeconomic Status		
	Low SES	High SES	Q
Boys	35	49	.29
Girls	60	57	-.06

(e)

% Ranking in the Upper Half of Their Class by Parental Rapport

	Parental Rapport		
	Weak Rapport	Strong Rapport	Q
Boys	43	42	-.01
Girls	48	72	.43

(f)

% With Strong Parental Rapport by Socioeconomic Status

	Socioeconomic Status		
	Low SES	High SES	Q
Boys	43	30	-.29
Girls	44	49	.11

Table 3.

% Planning to Attend College by Parental Rapport Controlling for Socioeconomic Status

Control Variable	Parental Rapport		Degree of association (Q) between Plans and Rapport
SES	Weak Rapport	Strong Rapport	Q
Boys			
Low SES	14	24	.30
High SES	47	40	-.15
Girls			
Low SES	33	52	.37
High SES	58	61	.05

Table 4.

% Ranking in the Upper Half of Their Class by Parental Rapport, Controlling on Socioeconomic Status

Parental Rapport		Degree of association (Q) between Grades and Rapport
Weak Rapport	Strong Rapport	Q
25	48	.46
55	33	-.43
47	78	.61
50	65	.30

Table 5.

% Planning to Attend College by Socioeconomic Status, Controlling for Grades in School

Control Variable	Socioeconomic Status		Degree of association (Q) between Plans and SES
Grades	Low SES	High SES	Q
Boys			
Low Grades	6	31	.74
High Grades	41	60	.36
Girls			
Low Grades	10	50	.81
High Grades	63	67	.10

Table 6.

% Planning to Attend College by Parental Rapport, Controlling for Grades in School

Parental Rapport		Degree of association (Q) between Plans and Rapport
Weak Rapport	Strong Rapport	Q
19	14	-.17
52	53	.03
25	36	.25
65	64	-.04

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